vitae
realising
the potential
of researchers



Research
—
leadership
—
resource

Networking

Introduction to Research Leadership

This module is part of the Introduction to Research Leadership series of resources, which provides an introduction to leadership theory, skills, behaviours and attributes for researchers who aspire to a research leadership position.

These resources were created by Vitae, a UK-based non-profit programme that supports the professional and career development of researchers globally. The resources are designed as a practical guide for you to use at an individual level. Depending on your preference and the amount of time you have available, you can focus on just one or two modules or work through all of the modules in the series at a pace that suits you.

Networking is the development, maintenance and leadership of networks of individuals who can offer advice and access to opportunities.

'It's useful to build your network . . . to understand what's going on outside your immediate field, it's useful to make those contacts . . . It will open up opportunities that you never think of, and increasingly as we do more and more collaborative work those things matter, you need somebody to be thinking of you.' *(Senior research leader[1])*

1. Academic research leader interviewed in: Denney, F., Mitchell, A., & Wheat, K. (2015). 'Developing the next generation: Guidance and good practice in the development of early career researchers and academics'. The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited. www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/guides-briefings-and-information/developing-the-next-generation-vitae-brunel-lfhe-2015.pdf



Networking:

It sounds obvious, but it's no use doing great research if few people are aware of it and you as a researcher. You want your research to have impact, and you need you and your research to be recognised and valued in order to pursue an academic career and be a successful research leader.

Of course, your academic publications are an extremely important part of that. But they are not the whole story. In this module we look at some of the other ways to build your profile to make you and your research more visible in the academic community.

The module relates to the following aspects of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework.

B3 Professional and Career Development: Networking

D2 Communication and dissemination: Communication media

It also touches upon:

- **B1 Personal qualities: Self-confidence**
- **B3 Professional and Career Development: Responsiveness to opportunities**
- **D1 Working with others: Collaboration**

Why is networking important?

Networking may be viewed with suspicion, especially if people see it as making contact with other people only or mainly to 'use them'. But networking is not an unprincipled way of behaving. It is largely about showing interest in other people's research for the purpose of wider and mutual benefits. In today's academic environment, networking is an important - if not critical - means of increasing the impact of your research and furthering your career.

Benefits of networking

- Sharing research questions, problems and developments with wider networks ensures you are not 're-inventing the wheel' and can potentially save you valuable time by directing you to a key resource.

- Within your institution, networking with peers and university staff can be a valuable support and information source to draw upon. From time to time we all need a bit of moral support too and sharing experiences with your peers can quickly demonstrate you are not alone!

- Increasingly, research projects are dependent upon collaborations with other disciplines, institutions or industry partners. Pulling together strong collaborative partnerships with the potential to win funding will be dependent on being able to make the right connections with the right people through your connections.

- The next career step as a researcher is never a forgone conclusion. Establishing and maintaining a wide professional network may also prove to be the opening to your next collaboration, contract post or change of career direction.

- Individuals who have large numbers of friends and contacts and who maintain relationships with colleagues and former colleagues tend to succeed in their careers. People tend to prefer to collaborate with people they know and like. Therefore, effective networkers are likely to be offered more opportunities.

Effective networkers are more likely to be offered more career opportunites

Published by Vitae © 2021 The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited

Research Leadership Resource: Networking

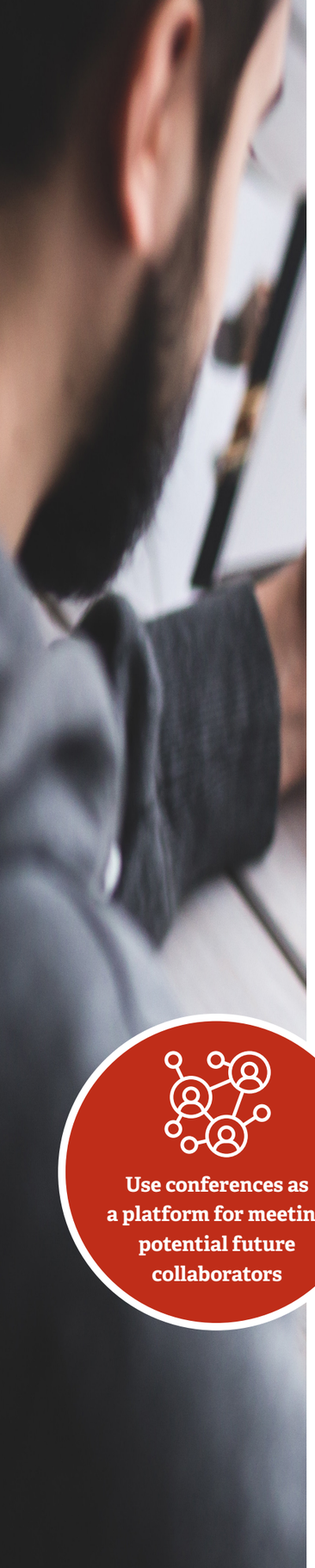
vitae realising the potential of researchers

Self-audit – Networking

This short exercise, based on the Vitae Researcher Development Framework, helps you assess your current networking behaviours and identify areas for development. In the first column, the numbers 1–5 signify development phases as you become more expert in your networking abilities.

RDF B3.4	Statement	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	This is an area I will work on
Phase 1 - 2	I develop and maintain co-operative networks and working relationships with supervisors, colleagues and peers within my institution.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I develop and maintain co-operative networks and working relationships with colleagues and peers from the wider research community.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I use personal networks effectively for feedback, advice, and critical appraisal of my work and for responding to opportunities.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I use online networks effectively for feedback, advice, and critical appraisal of my work and for responding to opportunities.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I engage with subject associations and public bodies.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Phase 3	I share external networks with less experienced researchers/students.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I am able to build professional rapport.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I am becoming a respected member of academic bodies and organisations.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Phase 4	I lead networks.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have national network connections with academic bodies and organisations.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have international network connections with academic bodies and organisations.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have national network connections with bodies and organisations beyond academia.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have international network connections with bodies and organisations beyond academia.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have policy-making network connections.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have network connections in public and/or private research and development areas.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Phase 5	I have influential connections with significant bodies and organisations.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have a high impact on society through network connections with academic organisations.	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have a high impact on society through network connections with organisations beyond academia.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Published by Vitae © 2021 The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited



Research Leadership Resource: Networking

How can you improve?

Reciprocity

Networking is based on the principle of reciprocity: just as you draw opportunities and support from your networks you are expected to put something back in. Investing time in engaging with people in your network, providing help and guidance, will influence the level of help and support you will get in return.

Network effectively at conferences

Conference attendance is one of the most important ways that early career researchers particularly can build their network and get known within their research area. Use conferences as a platform for meeting potential future collaborators, colleagues, and employers.

'Engage with the academic community . . . go to conferences. I hate the concept and term networking because I never feel very comfortable thinking I'm networking, but get to know people because they're going to be your colleagues if you stick in that field for years and years and years to come.'

(Senior research leader[1])

Before a conference, think about what networking opportunities they will present. Look at the list of attendees or speakers and identify key researchers that you should meet. Select a few key researchers and contact them in advance to arrange a time to meet. Talk to people you already know to build up relationships with existing contacts. Also talk to people you don't know to make new ones, targeting those on your key researchers list.

Don't spend your entire social time with people from your department. Don't talk about your research all night long - talk about other shared interests and hobbies - which will help build rapport.

After the conference, follow up contacts that you have made in person via email and/or create a link with your online profile.

Volunteer to get involved with regional and national activities

For example, become an active member of an academic body, and seek out opportunities to join panels, forums or working groups or provide contributions to relevant consultations. Join committees within your region, or set one up if one doesn't exist. This will really put you at the centre of a network and help you to build new relationships.

Use conferences as a platform for meeting potential future collaborators

Engage in online networks

Engage in online networks

Online networking is the most accessible platform for networking, creating access to a vast potential audience. Social networking sites (SNS) enable you to access a professional community, use the people you know to help you make contacts, help you to keep track of who you are in contact with and give you access to tools that facilitate networking, such as blogs, file share, and messaging applications. Carefully consider what forums you use for your professional contacts, as the culture of SNS can lead you to be overly informal and reduce your privacy. Joining discussion groups is a good way to hear about 'hot topics', access a whole academic community in one place, have interesting and high-level academic discussions and potentially make a name for yourself.

Establish an online professional profile

Setting up a website around your research topic presents a powerful opportunity for networking. Websites are good for self-promotion, as they allow you to present yourself and your research in the way you choose, as well as extending the scope of a business card or email by giving someone a way to find out more about you. If possible, use your institutional website to promote your profile. Creating a description of your research also means you can be found by other researchers via a search.

Tips for confident networking

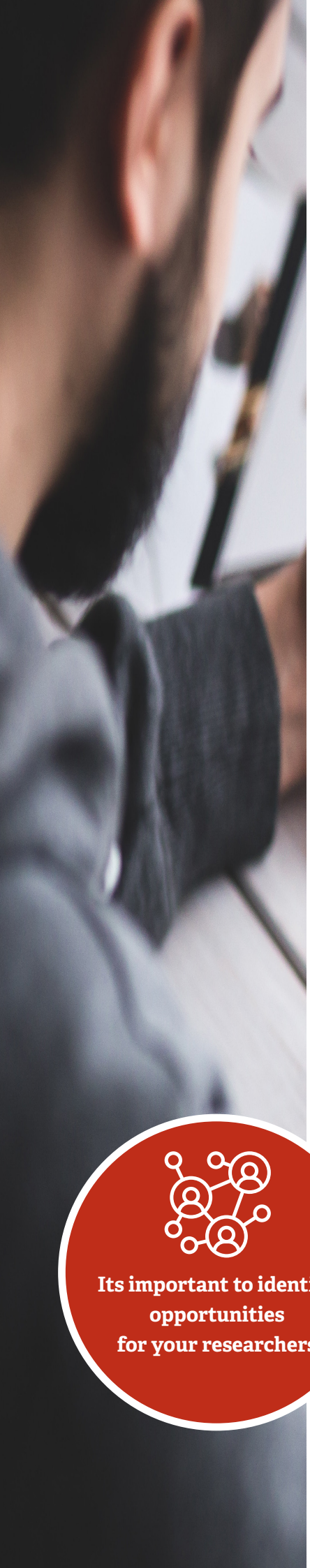
Do:

- **See networking as a long-term investment in your career.**
- **See everything as an opportunity for networking, including informal, social events.**
- **Have an 'elevator pitch' (a brief summary of your research) AND something to say about the particular event you are attending.**
- **Do your research - know who everyone is before you attend the event.**
- **Engage before walking into the room - email and social media are great for this!**
- **Remember that first impressions are important - be genuine and listen. Every interaction is an opportunity to develop your professional reputation.**

Don't:

- **. . . attend an event without knowing why you are going and what you'd like to get out of it.**
- **. . . always go to others - think of ways of getting others to come to you. Engaging with them in advance is a key way of doing this.**
- **. . . underestimate the network value of each new connection. Even if the person you are interacting with is not directly connected to your area(s) of interest, they may lead you to someone who is.**

Published by Vitae © 2021 The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited



Its important to identify opportunities for your researchers

As a research leader

As you get more established in your career, you will also have a responsibility to support the professional development of others. Drawing upon your networks to help early career researchers make their own professional introductions and connections is a positive way of doing this. You might find ways to help others make their publications more visible too.

'Well we've actually produced some guidelines . . . on how to get your papers more cited . . . always make your work very clear, give it good titles that have broad appeal, write abstracts that people beyond your immediate field can understand, things of this kind. All of those give you more visibility.'

(Senior research leader[1])

'Identifying opportunities for your researchers, for example, going to the key conference they should be seen at, introducing them to the right people to talk to . . . identifying other training events that they may need and facilitating these so that they can go and benefit.'

(Senior research leader[1])

My networking goals

In the light of this information, what three areas would you like to develop in relation to networking?

For each, set a specific goal. You may like to use the tips on goal setting in the career management unit.

Vitae and its membership programme are managed by the **Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited** an independent registered charity. CRAC Registered Charity No 313164.

Published by Vitae © 2021 The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited